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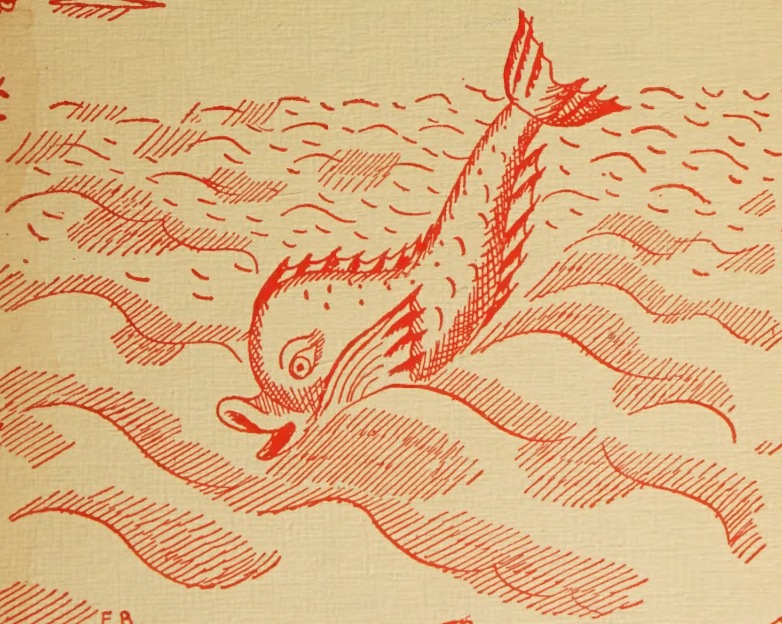
THE DOLPHIN BOOKS

# VULGARITY IN LITERATURE

*BY*

ALDOUS HUXLEY



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THE DOLPHIN BOOKS

# VULGARITY IN LITERATURE

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# VULGARITY IN LITERATURE

DIGRESSIONS FROM A THEME

*By*

ALDOUS HUXLEY

LONDON

CHATTO AND WINDUS

1930

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# VULGARITY IN LITERATURE

## § 1

THE difficulty, when one is using words of appraisal, the difficulty of knowing what one means!

Then why, if it is so hard, make any attempt to know? Would it not be wiser to follow the example of that Geneva Conference convened, not long ago, to consider means for the suppression of the traffic in obscene publications? For when the Greek delegate (too Socratic by half) suggested that it might be a good thing to establish a preliminary definition of the word 'obscene,' Sir Archibald Bodkin sprang to his feet with a protest. 'There is no definition of indecent or obscene in English Statute Law.' The law of other countries being, apparently, no more explicit, it was unanimously decided that no definition was possible. After which, having triumphantly asserted that they did not know what they were talking about, the members of the Congress settled down to their discussion.

My business is not with the obscene, but with the vulgar. When I call something or somebody 'vulgar,' what *precisely* (as Mr. T. S. Eliot would critically ask) am I saying? Rushing in where Sir Archibald and his colleagues so wisely feared to tread, I shall try to discover.



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To begin with, then, I find that there are many occasions when, strictly speaking, I *mean* nothing at all, but am using the word merely to express a dislike—as a term of abuse, a politer synonym, shall we say, of 'bloody.' On such occasions 'vulgar' is no more than a vaguely pejorative noise. More often, however, I find that I intend to *say* something when I employ the word, not merely to snarl.

In certain circumstances, for example, I use the word in its strict etymological sense. When I say that a man has a vulgar accent or vulgar table manners, I mean that his accent and his manners remind me of those current in the lower ranks of society—of the particular society in which I happen to live. For vulgar here is not necessarily vulgar there. *Eructavit cor meum.* East of Constantinople, the action is said to be polite. Here, Sir Toby Belch, though a knight, can never have moved in the highest circles. Or, yes; on second thoughts, he conceivably might have. For the standards of vulgarity are seen to change as you move vertically upwards through the strata of a single society, just as they change before the eyes of a spectator moving horizontally from one society to another. What is vulgar on high level A may have ceased to be vulgar on the yet higher level B. There are refinements beyond refinements, almost *ad infinitum.* Like Paradise, the *Monde* itself has its high and low. Proust is the Dante of these high mundane spheres; but while it took several centuries to reduce Dante's guide-book to

out-of-dateness, Proust's is already, in its factual details (though not, of course, in its spirit), as hopelessly behind the times as a pre-war Baedeker. The social heavens are for ever changing.

But these relativities are too obvious to be very interesting. The Absolute chimerically beckons; and, though we can never hope to come up with it, the chase may be amusing in itself and, who knows? by the way we may actually catch a hare or two, smaller indeed and less noble than the quarry we are after, but having at least the merit of solidly existing, of being visibly there.

We have considered, so far, two cases: the case in which the word 'vulgar' says, 'I don't like this,' and the case in which it says, 'This reminds me of what are, to me, the lower classes.' In the case we are about to consider now, 'vulgar' says something less easily definable. For instance, I can assert that 'this man is vulgar. The fact that he is of good family and was educated at the right places makes no difference. He is vulgar, intrinsically.' What *precisely* do I mean here?

Etymology is helpful even in this case. The vulgar man of good family is not, indeed, a member of the lower classes in our actual society. But there is an ideal society, in which, we feel, he and his like belong to some very squalid caste.

No values, except perhaps the most rudimentary biological values, are accepted by all human beings. Only

the tendency to evaluate is universal. In other words, the machinery for creating values is given, but the values themselves must be manufactured. The process has not yet been rationalized; value-making is still a village industry. Among the educated classes in the West, however, values are sufficiently nearly standardized for us to be able to speak about the ideal society as though it were an absolute.

The extremes of vulgarity are as rare as the extremes of goodness, wickedness, or genius; but it happens occasionally that we meet a nature's non-gentleman who is obviously one of the pariahs of our ideal society. Such people are, intrinsically, what those wretched Indians who sweep the floor and empty the slops are by accident—untouchable. In India, when you leave your hotel and want to tip the sweeper, you must not hold out the coin, expecting him to take it. His immediate reaction to your gesture will be to shrink away; for if your fingers were to touch his receiving palm you would be defiled. He is considerately sparing you the trouble of having to take a bath, fumigate yourself, and change your underclothing. The tipping of sweepers has its own special technique; you must halt several yards away from your expectant beneficiary and throw your gift on to the ground at his feet. Commercial transactions during the Black Death must have been carried on in much the same style.

Training has taught the accidentally untouchable Indian to realize his own defiling lowness and to act accordingly.

Would that nature had done the same for the intrinsic outcastes of our ideal society! But, alas, she hasn't. You find yourself at dinner sitting next to X, the eminent politician; the journalist, Y, is at large and invites you to his favourite public house. Unlike the sweepers of India, these intrinsic outcastes do not play their untouchable's part. So far are they from knowing their places, that they actually think they are doing you an honour by sitting at your table, a kindness by offering you, before lunch and in some stinking bar parlour, a double whisky or a noggin of glutinous port. As for shrinking, they do not dream of it; on the contrary, they push themselves forward. Indeed, a certain loud self-satisfaction (which renders it impossible for one to feel much sympathy with the intrinsic untouchable in his affliction), a certain thrusting and pretentious vanity is, as I shall have many occasions of showing in the course of these digressions, one of the essential elements of vulgarity. Vulgarity is a lowness that proclaims itself—and the self-proclamation is also intrinsically a lowness. For pretentiousness in whatever field, unless more than justified by native capacity and demonstrable achievement, is low in itself. Moreover, it underlines all other deficiencies and, as a suitable chemical will reveal words written in invisible ink, calls out the latent lownesses in a character, so that they manifest themselves in the form of open vulgarities.

There is a vulgarity in the sphere of morals, a vulgarity of emotions and intellect, a vulgarity even of the spirit. A

man can be wicked, or stupid, or passionate without being vulgar. He can also be vulgarly good, vulgarly intelligent, vulgarly emotional or unemotional, vulgarly spiritual. Moreover, he can belong to the highest class in one sphere of activity and yet be low in another. I have known men of the greatest intellectual refinement, whose emotional life was repugnantly vulgar. Each one of us is like the population of a town built on the slope of a hill: we exist simultaneously at many different levels.

These brief notes on personal vulgarity are meant to serve as an introduction to what I propose to say about vulgarity in literature. Letters, life—the two worlds are parallel. What is true here is true, with a difference, there. For the sake of completeness I ought, of course, to have illustrated my generalizations about vulgarity in life with concrete examples. But this would have meant an excursion into the realm of fiction, or historical biography—or contemporary libel. I should have had to create a set of artistically living characters, with the circumstances of their existence. World and time, as usual, were lacking. Besides, as it happens, I have, in several works of fiction, elaborately exemplified emotional and intellectual vulgarity as revealed in life—perhaps also, without meaning to, as they are revealed in letters! I shall not begin again here. Here the ready-made examples of vulgarity provided by literature will serve, retrospectively and by analogy, to illustrate my generalizations about vulgarity in life.

## § II

Vulgarity in literature must be distinguished from the vulgarity inherent in the profession of letters. Every man is born with his share of Original Sin, to which every writer adds a pinch of Original Vulgarity. Necessarily and quite inevitably. For exhibitionism is always vulgar, even if what you exhibit is the most exquisitely refined of souls.

Some writers are more squeamishly conscious than others of the essential vulgarity of their trade—so much so, that, like Flaubert, they have found it hard to commit that initial offence against good breeding: the putting of pen to paper.

It is just possible, of course, that the greatest writers have never written; that the world is full of Monsieur Testes and mute inglorious Miltons, too delicate to come before the public. I should like to believe it; but I find it hard. Your great writer is possessed by a devil, over which he has very little control. If the devil wants to come out (and, in practice, devils always do want to come out), it will do so, however loud the protests of the aristocratic consciousness, with which it uneasily cohabits. The profession of literature may be 'fatally marred by a secret absurdity'; the devil simply doesn't care. *Scribo quia absurdum.*

## § III

To be pale, to have no appetite, to swoon at the slightest provocation—these, not so long ago, were the signs of maidenly good breeding. In other words, when a girl was marked with the stigmata of anaemia and chronic constipation, you knew she was a lady. Virtues are generally fashioned (more or less elegantly, according to the skill of the moral *couturier*) out of necessities. Rich girls had no need to work; the aristocratic tradition discouraged them from voluntarily working; and the Christian tradition discouraged them from compromising their maiden modesty by taking anything like violent exercise. Good carriage-roads and, finally, railways spared them the healthy fatigues of riding. The virtues of Fresh Air had not yet been discovered and the Draught was still the commonest, as it was almost the most dangerous, manifestation of the Diabolic Principle. More perverse than Chinese foot-squeezers, the topiarists of European fashion had decreed that the elegant should have all her viscera constricted and displaced by tight lacing. In a word, the rich girl lived a life scientifically calculated to make her unhealthy. A virtue was made of humiliating necessity, and the pale ethereal swooner of romantic literature remained for years the type and mirror of refined young womanhood.

Something of the same kind happens from time to time in the realm of literature. Moments come when too conspicuous a show of vigour, too frank an interest in common things are signs of literary vulgarity. To be really lady-like, the Muses, like their mortal sisters, must be anaemic and constipated. On the more sensitive writers of certain epochs circumstances impose an artistic wasting away, a literary consumption. This distressing fatality is at once transformed into a virtue, which it becomes a duty for all to cultivate.

'*Vivre? Nos valets le feront pour nous.*' For, oh, the vulgarity of it! The vulgarity of this having to walk and talk; to open and close the eyes; to think and drink and every day, yes, every day, to eat, eat and excrete. And then this having to pursue the female of one's species, or the male, whichever the case may be; this having to cerebrate, to calculate, to copulate, to propagate. . . . No, no—too gross, too stupidly low. Such things, as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam says, are all very well for footmen. But for a descendant of how many generations of Templars, of Knights of Rhodes and of Malta, Knights of the Garter and the Holy Ghost and all the variously coloured Eagles—obviously, it was out of the question; it simply wasn't done. *Vivre? Nos valets le feront pour nous.*

At the same point, but on another plane, of the great spiral of history, Prince Gotama, more than two thousand years before, had also discovered the vulgarity of living.

The sight of a corpse rotting by the roadside had set him thinking. It was his first introduction to death. Now, a corpse, poor thing, is an untouchable and the process of decay is, of all pieces of bad manners, the vulgarest imaginable. For a corpse is, by definition, a person absolutely devoid of *savoir vivre*. Even your sweeper knows better. But in every greatest king, in every loveliest flowery princess, in every poet most refined, every best dressed dandy, every holiest and most spiritual teacher, there lurks, waiting, waiting for the moment to emerge, an outcaste of the outcastes, a dung carrier, a dog, lower than the lowest, bottomlessly vulgar.

What with making their way and enjoying what they have won, heroes have no time to think. But the sons of heroes—ah, they have all the necessary leisure. The future Buddha belonged to the generation which has time. He saw the corpse, he smelt it vulgarly stinking, he thought. The echoes of his meditations still reverberate, rich with an accumulated wealth of harmonics, like the memory of the organ's final chord pulsing back and forth under the vaulting of a cathedral.

No less than that of war or statecraft, the history of economics has its heroic ages. Economically, the nineteenth century was the equivalent of those brave times about which we read in Beowulf and the Iliad. Its heroes struggled, conquered or were conquered, and had no time to think. Its bards, the Romantics, sang rapturously, not

of the heroes, but of higher things (for they were Homers who detested Achilles) sang with all the vehemence which one of the contemporary heroes would have put into grinding the faces of the poor. It was only in the second and third generation that men began to have leisure and the necessary detachment to find the whole business—economic heroism and romantic bardism—rather vulgar. Villiers, like Gotama, was one who had time. That he was the descendant of all those Templars and Knights of this and that was, to a great extent, irrelevant. The significant fact was this : he was, or at any rate chronologically might have been, the son and grandson of economic heroes and romantic bards—a man of the decadence. Sons have always a rebellious wish to be disillusioned by that which charmed their fathers ; and, wish or no wish, it was difficult for a sensitive man to see and smell the already putrefying corpse of industrial civilization and not be shocked by it into distressful thought. Villiers was duly shocked ; and he expressed his shockedness in terms of an aristocratic disdain that was almost Brahminical in its intensity. But his feudal terminology was hardly more than an accident. Born without any of Villiers' perhaps legendary advantages of breeding, other sensitives of the same post-heroic generation were just as profoundly shocked. The scion of Templars had a more striking vocabulary than the others—that was all. For the most self-conscious and intelligent artists of the last decades of

the nineteenth century, too frank an acceptance of the obvious actualities of life, too hearty a manner and (to put it grossly) too many 'guts' were rather vulgar. *Vivre? Nos valets le feront pour nous.* (Incidentally, the suicide rate took a sharp upward turn during the 'sixties. In some countries it is nearly five times what it was seventy years ago.) Zola was the master footman of the age. That vulgar interest in actual life! And all those guts of his—was the man preparing to set up as a tripe-dresser?

A few ageing ninetyites survive; a few young neo-ninetyites, who judge of art and all other human activities in terms of the Amusing and the Tiresome, play kittenishly around with their wax flowers and stuffed owls and Early Victorian beadwork. But, old and young, they are insignificant. Guts and an acceptance of the actual are no longer vulgar. Why not? What has happened? Three things: the usual reaction of sons against fathers, another industrial revolution and a rediscovery of mystery. We have entered (indeed, we have perhaps already passed through) a second heroic age of economics. Its Homers, it is true, are almost without exception sceptical, ironic, denunciatory. But this scepticism, this irony, this denunciation are as lively and vehement as that which is doubted and denounced. Babbitt infects even his detractors with some of his bouncing vitality. The Romantics, in the same way, possessed an energy proportionate to that of their enemies, the economic heroes

who were creating modern industrialism. Life begets life, even in opposition to itself.

*Vivre? Nos valets le feront pour nous.* But the physicists and psychologists have revealed the universe as a place, in spite of everything, so fantastically queer, that to hand it over to be enjoyed by footmen would be a piece of gratuitous humanitarianism. Servants must not be spoiled. The most refined spirits need not be ashamed in taking a hearty interest in the rediscovered mystery of the actual world. True, it is a sinister as well as a fascinating and mysterious world. And what a mess, with all our good intentions, we have made and are busily making of our particular corner of it! The same old industrial corpse—to some extent disinfected and galvanically stimulated at the moment into a twitching semblance of healthy life—still rots by the wayside, as it rotted in Villiers' time. And as for Gotama's carrion—that of course is always with us. There are, as ever, excellent reasons for personal despair; while the reasons for despairing about society are actually a good deal more cogent than at most times. A Mallarméan shrinking away into pure poetry, a delicate Henry-Jamesian avoidance of all the painful issues would seem to be justified. But the spirit of the time—the industrially heroic time in which we live—is opposed to these retirements, these handings over of life to footmen. It demands that we should 'press with strenuous tongue against our palate' not only joy's grape, but every Dead Sea fruit.

Even dust and ashes must be relished with gusto. Thus, modern American fiction, like the modern American fact which it so accurately renders, is ample and lively. And yet, ' Dust and ashes, dust and ashes ' is the fundamental theme and final moral of practically every modern American novel of any distinction. High spirits and a heroic vitality are put into the expression of despair. The hopelessness is almost Rabelaisian.

## § IV

It was vulgar at the beginning of the nineteenth century to mention the word 'handkerchief' on the French tragic stage. An arbitrary convention had decreed that tragic personages must inhabit a world, in which noses exist only to distinguish the noble Romans from the Greeks and Hebrews, never to be blown. Arbitrary conventions of one sort or another are essential to art. But as the sort of convention constantly varies, so does the corresponding vulgarity. We are back among the relativities.

In the case of the handkerchief we have a particular and rather absurd application of a very widely accepted artistic convention. This convention is justified by the ancient metaphysical doctrine, which distinguishes in the universe two principles, mind and matter, and which attributes to mind an immeasurable superiority. In the name of this principle many religions have demanded the sacrifice of the body; their devotees have responded by mortifying the flesh and, in extreme cases, by committing self-castration and even suicide. Literature has its Manichaeans as well as religion: men who on principle would exile the body and its functions from the world of their art, who condemn as vulgar all too particular and detailed accounts of physical actuality, as vulgar any attempt to relate mental or spiritual

events to happenings in the body. The inhabitants of their universe are not human beings, but the tragical heroes and heroines who never blow their noses.

Artistically, the abolition of handkerchiefs and all that handkerchiefs directly or indirectly stand for has certain advantages. The handkerchiefless world of pure mind and spirit is, for an adult, the nearest approach to that infinitely comfortable Freudian womb, towards which, as towards a lost paradise, we are always nostalgically yearning. In the handkerchiefless mental world we are at liberty to work things out to their logical conclusions, we can guarantee the triumph of justice, we can control the weather and (in the words of those yearning popular songs which are the national anthems of Wombland) make our Dreams come True by living under Skies of Blue with You. Nature in the mental world is not that collection of tiresomely opaque and recalcitrant objects, so bewildering to the man of science, so malignantly hostile to the man of action; it is the luminously rational substance of a Hegelian nature-philosophy, a symbolic manifestation of the principles of dialectic. Artistically, such a Nature is much more satisfactory (because so much more easy to deal with) than the queer, rather sinister and finally quite incomprehensible monster, by which, when we venture out of our ivory towers, we are instantly swallowed. And man, than whom, as Sophocles long since remarked, nothing is more monstrous, more marvellous, more terrifyingly strange (it is

hard to find a single word to render his *deinoteron*)—man, too, is a very unsatisfactory subject for literature. For this creature of inconsistencies can live on too many planes of existence. He is the inhabitant of a kind of psychological Woolworth Building; you never know—he never knows himself—which floor he 'll step out at to-morrow, nor even whether, a minute from now, he won't take it into his head to jump into the elevator and shoot up a dozen or down perhaps twenty stories into some totally different mode of being. The effect of the Manichaean condemnation of the body is at once to reduce this impossible skyscraper to less than half its original height. Confined henceforward to the mental floors of his being, man becomes an almost easily manageable subject for the writer. In the French tragedies (the most completely Manichaean works of art ever created) lust itself has ceased to be corporeal and takes its place among the other abstract symbols, with which the authors write their strange algebraical equations of passion and conflict. The beauty of algebraical symbols lies in their universality; they stand not for one particular case, but for all cases. Manichaeans, the classical writers confined themselves exclusively to the study of man as a creature of pure reason and discarnate passions. Now the body particularizes and separates, the mind unites. By the very act of imposing limitations the classicists were enabled to achieve a certain universality of statement impossible to those who attempt to reproduce

the particularities and incompletenesses of actual corporeal life. But what they gained in universality, they lost in vivacity and immediate truth. You cannot get something for nothing. Some people think that universality can be paid for too highly.

To enforce their ascetic code the classicists had to devise a system of critical sanctions. Chief among these was the stigma of vulgarity attached to all those who insisted too minutely on the physical side of man's existence. Speak of handkerchiefs in a tragedy? The solecism was as monstrous as picking teeth with a fork.

At a dinner party in Paris not long ago I found myself sitting next to a French Professor of English, who assured me in the course of an otherwise very agreeable conversation that I was a leading member of the Neo-Classic school and that it was as a leading member of the Neo-Classic school that I was lectured about to the advanced students of contemporary English literature under his tutelage. The news depressed me. Classified, like a museum specimen, and lectured about, I felt most dismally posthumous. But that was not all. The thought that I was a Neo-Classic preyed upon my mind—a Neo-Classic without knowing it, a Neo-Classic against all my desires and intentions. For I have never had the smallest ambition to be a Classic of any kind, whether Neo, Palaeo, Proto or Eo. Not at any price. For, to begin with, I have a taste for the lively, the mixed and the incomplete in art, preferring it to the

universal and the chemically pure. In the second place, I regard the classical discipline, with its insistence on elimination, concentration, simplification, as being, for all the formal difficulties it imposes on the writer, essentially an escape from, a getting out of, the greatest difficulty—which is to render adequately, in terms of literature, that infinitely complex and mysterious thing, actual reality. The world of mind is a comfortable Wombland, a place to which we flee from the bewildering queerness and multiplicity of the actual world. Matter is incomparably subtler and more intricate than mind. Or, to put it a little more philosophically, the consciousness of events which we have immediately, through our senses and intuitions and feelings, is incomparably subtler than any idea we can subsequently form of that immediate consciousness. Our most refined theories, our most elaborate descriptions are but crude and barbarous simplifications of a reality that is, in every smallest sample, infinitely complex. Now, simplifications must, of course, be made; if they were not, it would be quite impossible to deal artistically (or, for that matter, scientifically) with reality at all. What is the smallest amount of simplification compatible with comprehensibility, compatible with the expression of a humanly significant meaning? It is the business of the non-classical naturalistic writer to discover. His ambition is to render, in literary terms, the quality of immediate experience—in other words, to express the finally inexpressible. To

come anywhere near achieving this impossibility is much more difficult, it seems to me, than, by eliminating and simplifying, to achieve the perfectly realizable classical ideal. The cutting out of all the complex particularities of a situation (which means, as we have seen, the cutting out of all that is corporeal in it) strikes me as mere artistic shirking. But I disapprove of the shirking of artistic difficulties. Therefore I find myself disapproving of classicism.

Literature is also philosophy, is also science. In terms of beauty it enunciates truths. The beauty-truths of the best classical works possess, as we have seen, a certain algebraic universality of significance. Naturalistic works contain the more detailed beauty-truths of particular observation. These beauty-truths of art are truly scientific. All that modern psychologists, for example, have done is to systematize and de-beautify the vast treasures of knowledge about the human soul contained in novel, play, poem and essay. Writers like Blake and Shakespeare, like Stendhal and Dostoevsky, still have plenty to teach the modern scientific professional. There is a rich scientific harvest to be reaped in the works even of minor writers. By nature a natural historian, I am ambitious to add my quota to the sum of particularized beauty-truths about man and his relations with the world about him. (Incidentally, this world of relationships, this borderland between 'subjective' and 'objective' is one which literature is peculiarly,

perhaps uniquely, well fitted to explore.) I do not want to be a Classical, or even a Neo-Classical, eliminator and generalizer.

This means, among other things, that I cannot accept the Classicists' excommunication of the body. I think it not only permissible, but necessary, that literature should take cognizance of physiology and should investigate the still obscure relations between the mind and its body. True, many people find the reports of such investigations, when not concealed in scientific text-books and couched in the decent obscurity of a Graeco-Latin jargon, extremely and inexcusably vulgar; and many more find them downright wicked. I myself have frequently been accused, by reviewers in public and by unprofessional readers in private correspondence, both of vulgarity and of wickedness—on the grounds, so far as I have ever been able to discover, that I reported my investigations into certain phenomena in plain English and in a novel. The fact that many people should be shocked by what he writes practically imposes it as a duty upon the writer to go on shocking them. For those who are shocked by truth are not only stupid, but morally reprehensible as well; the stupid should be educated, the wicked punished and reformed. All these praiseworthy ends can be attained by a course of shocking; retributive pain will be inflicted on the truth-haters by the first shocking truths, whose repetition will gradually build up in those who read them an immunity to pain and will

end by reforming and educating the stupid criminals out of their truth-hating. For a familiar truth ceases to shock. To render it familiar is therefore a duty. It is also a pleasure. For, as Baudelaire says, '*ce qu'il y a d'enivrant dans le mauvais goût, c'est le plaisir aristocratique de déplaire.*'

## § v

The aristocratic pleasure of displeasing is not the only delight that bad taste can yield. One can love a certain kind of vulgarity for its own sake. To overstep artistic restraints, to protest too much for the fun of baroquely protesting—such offences against good taste are intoxicatingly delightful to commit, not because they displease other people (for to the great majority they are rather pleasing than otherwise), but because they are intrinsically vulgar, because the good taste against which they offend is as nearly as possible an absolute good taste; they are artistic offences that have the exciting quality of the sin against the Holy Ghost.

It was Flaubert, I think, who described how he was tempted, as he wrote, by swarms of gaudy images and how, a new St. Antony, he squashed them ruthlessly, like lice, against the bare wall of his study. He was resolved that his work should be adorned only with its own intrinsic beauty and with no extraneous jewels, however lovely in themselves. The saintliness of this ascetic of letters was duly rewarded; there is nothing in all Flaubert's writings that remotely resembles a vulgarity. Those who follow his religion must pray for the strength to imitate their saint.

The strength is seldom vouchsafed. The temptations which Flaubert put aside are, by any man of lively fancy and active intellect, incredibly difficult to be resisted. An image presents itself, glittering, iridescent; capture it, pin it down, however irrelevantly too brilliant for its context. A phrase, a situation suggests a whole train of striking or amusing ideas that fly off at a tangent, so to speak, from the round world on which the creator is at work; what an opportunity for saying something witty or profound! True, the ornament will be in the nature of a florid excrescence on the total work; but never mind. In goes the tangent—or rather, out into artistic irrelevancy. And in goes the effective phrase that is too effective, too highly coloured for what it is to express; in goes the too emphatic irony, the too tragical scene, the too pathetic tirade, the too poetical description. If we succumb to all these delightful temptations, if we make welcome all these gaudy lice instead of squashing them at their first appearance, our work will soon glitter like a South American parvenu, dazzling with parasitic ornament, and vulgar. For a self-conscious artist, there is a most extraordinary pleasure in knowing exactly what the results of showing off and protesting too much must be and then (in spite of this knowledge, or because of it) proceeding, deliberately and with all the skill at his command, to commit precisely those vulgarities, against which his conscience warns him and which he knows he will afterwards

regret. To the aristocratic pleasure of displeasing other people, the conscious offender against good taste can add the still more aristocratic pleasure of displeasing himself.

## § VI

Eulalie, Ulalume, Raven and Bells, Conqueror Worm and Haunted Palace. . . . Was Edgar Allan Poe a major poet? It would surely never occur to any English-speaking critic to say so. And yet, in France, from 1850 till the present time, the best poets of each generation—yes, and the best critics, too; for, like most excellent poets, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Paul Valéry are also admirable critics—have gone out of their way to praise him. Only a year or two ago M. Valéry repeated the now traditional French encomium of Poe, and added at the same time a protest against the faintness of our English praise. We who are speakers of English and not English scholars, who were born into the language and from childhood have been pickled in its literature—we can only say, with all due respect, that Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry are wrong and that Poe is not one of our major poets. A taint of vulgarity spoils, for the English reader, all but two or three of his poems—the marvellous 'City in the Sea' and 'To Helen,' for example, whose beauty and crystal perfection make us realize, as we read them, what a very great artist perished on most of the occasions when Poe wrote verse. It is to this perished artist that the French poets pay their tribute. Not being English they are incapable of appreci-

ating those finer shades of vulgarity that ruin Poe for us, just as we, not being French, are incapable of appreciating those finer shades of lyrical beauty which are, for them, the making of La Fontaine.

The substance of Poe is refined; it is his form that is vulgar. He is, as it were, one of Nature's Gentlemen, unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste. To the most sensitive and high-souled man in the world we should find it hard to forgive, shall we say, the wearing of a diamond ring on every finger. Poe does the equivalent of this in his poetry; we notice the solecism and shudder. Foreign observers do not notice it; they detect only the native gentlemanliness in the poetical intention, not the vulgarity in the details of execution. To them, we seem perversely and quite incomprehensibly unjust.

It is when Poe tries to make it too poetical that his poetry takes on its peculiar tinge of badness. Protesting too much that he is a gentleman, and opulent into the bargain, he falls into vulgarity. Diamond rings on every finger proclaim the parvenu.

Consider, for example, the first two stanzas of 'Ulalume.'

> The skies they were ashen and sober;
> The leaves they were crisped and sere—
> The leaves they were withering and sere;
> It was night in the lonesome October
> Of my most immemorial year;

It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,
In the misty mid region of Weir—
It was down by the dank tarn of Auber
In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

Here once, through an alley Titanic,
Of cypress, I roamed with my soul,
Of cypress, with Psyche my soul.
These were days when my heart was volcanic
As the scoriac rivers that roll—
As the lavas that restlessly roll
Their sulphurous currents down Yaanek
In the ultimate clime of the pole—
That groan as they roll down Mount Yaanek
In the realms of the boreal pole.

These lines protest too much (and with what a variety of voices !) that they are poetical, and, protesting, are therefore vulgar. To start with, the walloping dactylic metre is all too musical. Poetry ought to be musical, but musical with tact, subtly and variously. Metres whose rhythms, as in this case, are strong, insistent and practically invariable offer the poet a kind of short cut to musicality. They provide him (my subject calls for a mixture of metaphors) with a ready-made, reach-me-down music. He does not have to create a music appropriately modulated to his meaning ; all he has to do is to shovel the meaning into the moving stream of the metre and allow the current to carry it along on waves that, like those of the best hairdressers, are guaranteed permanent. Many nineteenth-century

poets used these metrical short cuts to music, with artistically fatal results.

> Then when nature around me is smiling
> The last smile which answers to mine,
> I do not believe it beguiling,
> Because it reminds me of thine.

How can one take even Byron seriously, when he protests his musicalness in such loud and vulgar accents? It is only by luck or an almost superhuman poetical skill that these all too musical metres can be made to sound, through their insistent barrel-organ rhythms, the intricate, personal music of the poet's own meaning. Byron occasionally, for a line or two, takes the hard kink out of those dactylic permanent waves and appears, so to speak, in his own musical hair; and Hood, by an unparalleled prodigy of technique, turns even the reach-me-down music of 'The Bridge of Sighs' into a personal music, made to the measure of the subject and his own emotion. Moore, on the contrary, is always perfectly content with the permanent wave; and Swinburne, that super-Moore of a later generation, was also content to be a permanent waver—the most accomplished, perhaps, in all the history of literature. The complexity of his ready-made musics and his technical skill in varying the number, shape and contour of his permanent waves are simply astonishing. But, like Poe and the others, he protested too much, he tried to be too poetical. However elaborately devious his short cuts to music may

be, they are still short cuts—and short cuts (this is the irony) to poetical vulgarity.

A quotation and a parody will illustrate the difference between ready-made music and music made to measure. I remember (I trust correctly) a simile of Milton's :—

> Like that fair field
> Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers,
> Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
> Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world.

Rearranged according to their musical phrasing, these lines would have to be written thus :—

> Like that fair field of Enna,
> where Proserpine gathering flowers,
> Herself a fairer flower,
> by gloomy Dis was gathered,
> Which cost Ceres all that pain
> To seek her through the world.

The contrast between the lyrical swiftness of the first four phrases, with that row of limping spondees which tells of Ceres' pain, is thrillingly appropriate. Bespoke, the music fits the sense like a glove.

How would Poe have written on the same theme? I have ventured to invent his opening stanza.

> It was noon in the fair field of Enna,
> When Proserpina gathering flowers—
> Herself the most fragrant of flowers,
> Was gathered away to Gehenna

By the Prince of Plutonian powers ;
Was borne down the windings of Brenner
To the gloom of his amorous bowers—
Down the tortuous highway of Brenner
To the god's agapemonous bowers.

The parody is not too outrageous to be critically beside the point; and anyhow the music is genuine Poe. That permanent wave is unquestionably an *ondulation de chez Edgar*. The much too musical metre is (to change the metaphor once more) like a rich chasuble, so stiff with gold and gems that it stands unsupported, a carapace of jewelled sound, into which the sense, like some snotty little seminarist, irrelevantly creeps and is lost. This music of Poe's —how much less really musical it is than that which, out of his nearly neutral decasyllables, Milton fashioned on purpose to fit the slender beauty of Proserpine, the strength and swiftness of the ravisher and her mother's heavy, despairing sorrow !

Of the versification of ' The Raven ' Poe says, in his *Philosophy of Composition* : ' My first object (as usual) was originality. The extent to which this has been neglected in versification is one of the most unaccountable things in the world. Admitting that there is little possibility of variety in mere *rhythm*, it is still clear that the possible varieties of metre and stanza are absolutely infinite—and yet, *for centuries, no man, in verse, has ever done or ever seemed to think of doing an original thing*.' This fact, which

Poe hardly exaggerates, speaks volumes for the good sense of the poets. Feeling that almost all strikingly original metres and stanzas were only illegitimate short cuts to a music which, when reached, turned out to be but a poor and vulgar substitute for individual music, they wisely stuck to the less blatantly musical metres of tradition. The ordinary iambic decasyllable, for example, is intrinsically musical enough to be just able, when required, to stand up by itself. But its musical stiffness can easily be taken out of it. It can be now a chasuble, a golden carapace of sound, now, if the poet so desires, a pliant, soft and, musically speaking, almost neutral material, out of which he can fashion a special music of his own to fit his thoughts and feelings in all their incessant transformations. Good landscape painters seldom choose a ' picturesque ' subject ; they want to paint their own picture, not have it imposed on them by nature. In the thoroughly paintable little places of this world you will generally find only bad painters. (It 's so easy to paint the thoroughly paintable.) The good ones prefer the unspectacular neutralities of the Home Counties to those Cornish coves and Ligurian fishing villages, whose picturesqueness is the delight of all those who have no pictures of their own to project on to the canvas. It is the same with poetry : good poets avoid what I may call, by analogy, ' musicesque ' metres, preferring to create their own music out of raw materials as nearly as possible neutral. Only bad poets, or good poets

against their better judgment, and by mistake, go to the Musicesque for their material. 'For centuries no man, in verse, has ever done or ever seemed to think of doing an original thing.' It remained for Poe and the other nineteenth-century metrists to do it; Procrustes-like, they tortured and amputated significance into fitting the ready-made music of their highly original metres and stanzas. The result was, in most cases, as vulgar as a Royal Academy Sunrise on Ben Nevis (with Highland Cattle) or a genuine hand-painted sketch of Portofino.

How could a judge so fastidious as Baudelaire listen to Poe's music and remain unaware of its vulgarity? A happy ignorance of English versification preserved him, I fancy, from this realization. His own imitations of mediaeval hymns prove how far he was from understanding the first principles of versification in a language where the stresses are not, as in French, equal, but essentially and insistently uneven. In his Latin poems Baudelaire makes the ghost of Bernard of Cluny write as though he had learned his art from Racine. The principles of English versification are much the same as those of mediaeval Latin. If Baudelaire could discover lines composed of equally stressed syllables in Bernard, he must also have discovered them in Poe. Interpreted according to Racinian principles, such verses as

> It was down by the dank tarn of Auber
> In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir

must have taken on, for Baudelaire, heaven knows what exotic subtlety of rhythm. We can never hope to guess what that ghoul-haunted woodland means to a Frenchman possessing only a distant and theoretical knowledge of our language.

Returning now to 'Ulalume,' we find that its too poetical metre has the effect of vulgarizing by contagion what would be otherwise perfectly harmless and refined technical devices. Thus, even the very mild alliterations in 'the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir' seem to protest too much. And yet an iambic verse beginning 'Woodland of Weir, ghoul-haunted,' would not sound in the least over-poetical. It is only in the dactylic environment that those two w's strike one as protesting too much.

And then there are the proper names. Well used, proper names can be relied on to produce the most thrilling musical-magical effects. But use them without discretion, and the magic evaporates into abracadabrical absurdity, or becomes its own mocking parody; the over-emphatic music shrills first into vulgarity and finally into ridiculousness. Poe tends to place his proper names in the most conspicuous position in the line (he uses them constantly as rhyme words), showing them off—these magical-musical jewels—as the *rastacouaire* might display the twin cabochon emeralds at his shirt cuffs and the platinum wrist watch, with his monogram in diamonds. These proper-name rhyme-jewels are particularly flashy in Poe's case

because they are mostly dissyllabic. Now, the dissyllabic rhyme in English is poetically so precious and so conspicuous by its richness that, if it is not perfect in itself and perfectly used, it emphatically ruins what it was meant emphatically to adorn. Thus, sound and association make of 'Thule' a musical-magical proper name of exceptional power. But when Poe writes,

> I have reached these lands but newly
> From an ultimate dim Thule,

he spoils the effect which the word ought to produce by insisting too much, and incompetently, on its musicality. He shows off his jewel as conspicuously as he can, but only reveals thereby the badness of its setting and his own Levantine love of display. For 'newly' does not rhyme with 'Thule'—or only rhymes on condition that you pronounce the adverb as though you were a Bengali, or the name as though you came from Whitechapel. The paramour of Goethe's king rhymed perfectly with the name of his kingdom; and when Laforgue wrote of that '*roi de Thulé, Immaculé*' his *rime riche* was entirely above suspicion. Poe's rich rhymes, on the contrary, are seldom above suspicion. That dank tarn of Auber is only very dubiously a fit poetical companion for the tenth month; and though Mount Yaanek is, *ex hypothesi*, a volcano, the rhyme with volcanic is, frankly, impossible. On other occasions Poe's proper names rhyme not only well enough, but actually, in the particular context, much too well.

Dead D'Elormie, in 'The Bridal Ballad,' is prosodically in order, because Poe had brought his ancestors over with the Conqueror (as he also imported the ancestors of that Guy de Vere who wept his tear over Lenore) for the express purpose of providing a richly musical-magical rhyme to 'bore me' and 'before me.' Dead D'Elormie is first cousin to Edward Lear's aged Uncle Arly, sitting on a heap of Barley—ludicrous; but also (unlike dear Uncle Arly) horribly vulgar, because of the too musical lusciousness of his invented name and his display, in all tragical seriousness, of an obviously faked Norman pedigree. Dead D'Elormie is a poetical disaster.

## § VII

It is vulgar, in literature, to make a display of emotions which you do not naturally have, but think you ought to have, because all the best people do have them. It is also vulgar (and this is the more common case) to have emotions, but to express them so badly, with so many too many protestings, that you seem to have no natural feelings, but to be merely fabricating emotions by a process of literary forgery. Sincerity in art, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is mainly a matter of talent. Keats's love letters ring true, because he had great literary gifts. Most men and women are capable of feeling passion, but not of expressing it; their love letters (as we learn from the specimens read aloud at inquests and murder trials, in the divorce court, during breach of promise cases) are either tritely flat or tritely bombastic. In either case manifestly insincere, and in the second case also vulgar—for to protest too much is always vulgar, when the protestations are so incompetent as not to carry conviction. And perhaps such excessive protestations can never be convincing, however accomplished the protester. D'Annunzio, for example—nobody could do a job of writing better than D'Annunzio. But when, as is too often the case, he makes much ado about nothing, we find it hard to be convinced either of the importance of the

nothing, or of the sincerity of the author's emotion about it—and this in spite of the incomparable splendour of D'Annunzio's much ado. True, excessive protestings may convince a certain public at a certain time. But when the circumstances, which rendered the public sensitive to the force and blind to the vulgarity of the too much protesting, have changed, the protests cease to convince. Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*, for example protests its author's sensibility with an extravagance that seems now, not merely vulgar, but positively ludicrous. At the time of its publication sentimentality was, for various reasons, extremely fashionable. Circumstances changed and *The Man of Feeling* revealed itself as vulgar to the point of ridiculousness; and vulgar and ridiculous it has remained ever since and doubtless will remain.

Again, to take a more modern instance, circumstances conspired to disguise the fundamental vulgarity of those excessive protestations of humanitarian philanthropy, with which, during the War, M. Romain Rolland filled his pacifist pamphlet. At the time they seemed (it depended on your political convictions) either sublime or diabolically wicked. Circumstances have changed and we are now shocked by the indiscriminateness and unintelligence of M. Rolland's loudly protested universal benevolence. When he said, 'Love your enemies,' Jesus affirmed (he was a realist) that there were enemies to love. M. Rolland's humanitarianism went a step further; there were no

enemies, nobody was wrong, nobody deserved condemnation, except perhaps for fighting. There was a general obliteration of distinctions; everything was melted down to the consistency of hog-wash. M. Rolland served out this delicious emotional soup, slop after slop, in generous ladlefuls, of emphatic and undistinguished and therefore eminently unconvincing and vulgar prose. The pamphlet was an infinitely well intentioned and, at the time, a politically valuable performance. But as literature it was vulgar —vulgar, because its excesses of sentiment were quite unbalanced by any excesses of discriminating intelligence; vulgar, because the loud protestings of its manner utterly lacked beauty or elegance. 'Le style c'est l'âme,' said M. Rolland once, improving (how characteristically!) on the earlier dictum. Papini's comment was unkind: M. Rolland has no style.

Shortly after the War, M. Rolland wrote a novel which was, in its own way and with much less excuse, as vulgar as his war-time pamphlet. I refer to that painful and (in the artistic, not, of course, the moral sense) profoundly 'insincere' book, *Colas Breugnon*. *Colas Breugnon* is loud with protestations of a positively Rabelaisian jollity. *Malgré tout*, a pacifist can be a good fellow and enjoy his bottle of Burgundy as well as another man. Reading it, one was reminded of those acutely distressing exhibitions of facetiousness and waggish joviality, by means of which certain clergymen try so hard to discount their dog collars

and curious waistcoats. Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much, is what we say to ourselves when we have to put up with one of these manifestations of Jocular Christianity. Pantagruelian pacifism is just as distressing, when it fails to come off (for success, I suppose, will justify almost anything) as Jocular Christianity. *Colas Breugnon* failed most lamentably to come off. Its loudly lyrical protestations (so lyrical, that M. Rolland's prose was for ever turning by mistake into blank alexandrines) were simply vulgar. Vulgar, at any rate, for me and, to my knowledge, for several other readers whom, out of self-flattery perhaps, I respect. But I have also met people to whom the too poetical prose and pacifico-pantagruelian protestings of *Colas Breugnon* brought conviction. The vulgarity escaped their notice and they were genuinely moved by what seemed to me, as literature, obviously 'insincere.'

In cases like this one can either shrug one's shoulders and say that there is no accounting for tastes. Or else one can rush in and boldly account for them by invoking, now the influence of special environmental circumstances, now a congenital fatality. The vulgarity of *The Man of Feeling* escaped the notice of most of its readers because, at the time of its publication, sentimentality was, for special historical reasons, more than ordinarily in favour. Similarly there may be, in the environment and history of certain individuals or certain classes, special circumstances which

make some kinds of generally recognized vulgarity imperceptible. But there is a natural as well as an acquired blindness to vulgarity. The Brahmins of the critical hierarchy are sensitive to differences of shade and tone which, among the Sudras, pass quite unnoticed. Needless to say, each one of us conceives that his place is among the Brahmins. I shall make, as a matter of course, the universal assumption—justifiably, in the circumstances; for a critic cannot do his business unless he first assumes that he is right; righter than any one else, or than a few specifically excepted judges. Having made this assumption, I am entitled to affirm that all those who do not agree with me (and with those who think like me) about the vulgarity of a given work are members of a lower caste in the critical hierarchy—that is, unless they can invoke as their excuse for judging badly the pressure of special external circumstances. Here I may speak without irrelevance of that curious dulness of perception, that lack of discrimination displayed, as every critic must have had many opportunities of amazedly discovering, by even apparently intelligent readers, not to mention all the others. Because we all know how to read, we imagine that we know what we read. Enormous fallacy! In reality, I imagine, the gift of literary discrimination is at least as rare as that of musical discrimination. We admit quite cheerfully the truth about music. But if music were not an educational luxury; if every child were taught its notes as now it is taught its

letters, if piano playing were, like geometry and French grammar, a compulsory subject in every school curriculum, what then? Should we as easily admit our lack of musical discrimination as we do at present, when most of us have never learned to read a simple melody or play on any instrument? I think not. Knowing something about the technique of music, we should imagine that we knew something (or, more probably, that we knew everything) about its substance. Anyhow, this is what seems to have happened in the case of literature. Because we have spent some years in acquiring the art of reading books, we think we have acquired the art of judging them. But in spite of universal education, there are still vast numbers of people who spontaneously love the lowest when they read it, and a great many more who, loving the highest, also love, if not the lowest, at any rate the low and the middling with an equal and quite undiscriminating enthusiasm. To a sensitive critic the judgments passed on books by quite intelligent and highly educated people often seem bewildering in their irrelevance and apparent perversity. He hears them speaking of utterly dissimilar works, as though there were nothing to choose between them. One happens to be refined and another vulgar; one genuine and another manifestly a fraud and a forgery. But such trifling differences seem to pass quite unnoticed. There are men, I suppose, who find it hard to distinguish between a dog and a toasting fork; but one seldom meets them, because they

are almost all in asylums. But men who fail to distinguish between works of art which, for the sensitive critic, are at least as dissimilar as dogs and toasting forks, run no risk of being certified as insane. On the contrary, they seem to be destined, in most cases, to become either the Head Masters of our most splendid Public Schools, or else Prime Ministers.

Even the greatest writers (to return to our original theme) can be guilty on occasion of the most shocking emotional vulgarity. Balzac and Dickens will provide us, in *Séraphita* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, with striking examples of various kinds of this vulgarity.

*Séraphita* is the most considerable work in that section of the Human Comedy devoted to religion in general and in particular (for Balzac was always specially interested in mysticism) to mystical religion. 'Mysticism? What you mean is misty schism,' was the remark once made to a friend of mine (who moves, as I, alas, do not, in the highest ecclesiastical circles) by a more than ordinarily eminent Eminence. The pun is not a bad one and, like the best Irish bulls, is pregnant. For the literature of mysticism, which is a literature about the inexpressible, is for the most part misty indeed—a London fog, but coloured pink. It is only in the works of the very best mystical writers that the fog lifts—to reveal what? A strange alternation of light and darkness: light to the limits of the possibly illuminable and after that the darkness of paradox and

incomprehensibility, or the yet deeper, the absolute night of silence. So much for the mist. As for the schism, that has always had a tendency to open its gulfs round the feet of the Catholic mystics. The Church has, at all times and very naturally, felt suspicious of those who insist on approaching God directly and not through the official ecclesiastical channels. And, strong in their immediate knowledge of God, the mystics on their side have often had a very short way with dogmas, rites and the priesthood. Mysticism brings with it the decay of authority. The process is, to some extent at least, reversible ; the decay of authority leads to mysticism. For whenever, thanks to the growth of scepticism, dogmas have come to be unbelievable and priesthood has lost its magical prestige, then mysticism comes into its own—into its own, at any rate, as a philosophical theory, though not necessarily as a practical way of life. Mystical religion is the ideal religion for doubters—those ultimate schismatics who have separated themselves from all belief. For the mystic is dispensed from intellectually *believing* in God ; he *feels* God. Or, to put it more accurately, he has (in Professor Otto's phrase) a ' numinous ' emotion, which he is at liberty to rationalize into a theological dogma—or not to rationalize, according to taste ; for it is perfectly possible to have a numinous emotion without believing in the existence of a *numen*, or divinity, as its hypothetical cause.

Contemporary scepticism is tempered with the usual

superstitions—belief in ghosts, preoccupation with magic and the like—and also with an interest in mysticism. In some cases this interest finds a practical expression. But as the practice of mystical religion entails the practice of asceticism, and as asceticism is not popular in this mass-producing age, when the first duty of every good citizen is to consume as much as he possibly can, our interest in mysticism is mainly theoretical and scientific.

It is painfully easy for a sceptic, who is also an amateur, theoretical and non-practising mystic, to fall into artistic insincerity, when writing about the kind of religious experiences which interest him. For to write convincingly about things which you do not know at first hand is very hard. The temptation is always to make up for deficiency of knowledge by stylistic emphasis and redundancy, by protesting too much. Only those who write consummately well can hope, in such circumstances, to avoid insincerity and vulgarity.

Balzac had nearly all the gifts. Two only were lacking —the gift of writing well and the gift of mysticism (in the mistiest and most schismatic as well as the most definite sense of the word). This was the more unfortunate, as he chose writing as his profession and mysticism as the subject of much of his writing.

Wherever he is dealing with subjects of which he has a natural first-hand knowledge, we do not notice the defects in Balzac's prose. In fact, it is not defective. It is only

in cases where he doesn't really know what he is talking about that Balzac's defects as a stylist emerge and become distressingly manifest. For in these cases he protests too much—with fatal results.

Balzac, I think, was less of a natural mystic than almost any other great writer. He had a prodigious intuitive knowledge of man as a social animal, of man in his mundane relations with other men. But of man in solitude, man in his relations with the universe and those mysterious depths within himself—in a word, of man the mystical animal—he knew, personally and at first hand, very little. I remember one day saying something of this kind to D. H. Lawrence, who nodded his agreement with me and summed up the matter by saying that Balzac was ' a gigantic dwarf.' A gigantic dwarf—gigantic in his power of understanding and vividly re-creating every conceivable worldly activity, with all the thoughts and feelings that the world can give birth to in a human mind ; but dwarfish when it came to dealing artistically with those inner activities which fill the mind when a man is living in solitude, or else—a naked individuality—in unworldly relationship with the naked individuality of other human beings. Dwarfish, in a word, precisely in those respects, in which Lawrence himself was gigantic ; and gigantic in a sphere where Lawrence, the most unworldly of writers, did not exist, did not even want to exist.

Religion and, in its widest, mistiest sense, mysticism

have an important place in human life. Ambitious to make his Comedy complete, Balzac gave them an important place in his work. Besides, he had the true romantic feeling for chiaroscuro. He loved to bring together, in picturesque contrast, this world with the heaven of idealism, angels with villainous Du Tillys and Nucingens, ambitious Rastignacs with utterly disinterested sages, artists and saints. Indeed, if there had been no such thing as mysticism, Balzac would have been compelled by his artistic principles to invent it; for that colossal statue of Mammon in his pantheon demanded urgently as pendant and foil a no less colossal statue of Idealism to fill the vacant niche on the opposite side of the aisle. Unhappily for Balzac's reputation as a religious writer, mysticism exists, and with it a considerable body of mystical literature, good, bad and indifferent. There are standards by which to judge such works as *Séraphita* and *Louis Lambert*. Judged by those standards, Balzac's mysticism turns out to be a very poor and at the same time (and for that very reason) a very pretentious thing. '*Quelle froide plaisanterie!*' was his Don Juan's summing up of the universe; and this, I believe, was what the essential Balzac naturally and intuitively felt about the whole business. Perhaps—his own temperament being more sanguine than Don Juan's—he would have found the pleasantry warm rather than cold; but, whatever its temperature, it was always a joke, huge, bad and rather malicious. On to this natural cynicism

Balzac grafted, by a process and as the result of reflection, ideals, religion, angels, Swedenborg—what not? But it is significant that whenever he wrote of these things, he wrote, as Blake declared that Milton wrote of God, 'in chains' (elastic chains; for they allowed him to kick and gesticulate most violently); and that whenever he wrote on a theme, which allowed him to give expression to his high-spirited natural cynicism, he wrote at ease and, relatively, very well.

Fashion, no doubt, as well as philosophy and an ambition to achieve universality, had an influence in turning Balzac, in spite of his temperament, towards mysticism. He lived in that strange age of Catholic reaction, when smart young men about town would go to the Abbé Dupanloup to study their Catechism and when, in the phrase of Joseph de Maistre, irreligion was *canaille*. Making a pleasure as well as a virtue of political necessity, Balzac's contemporaries used the restored religion as a source of emotional excitement. Not seriously believing (it was difficult at the beginning of the nineteenth century to do that), they went to church for the sake of the aesthetic and 'numinous' thrills which it could provide. To use the modern jargon, they were interested in religious experience, not in religious dogmas, which they made use of simply to procure the pleasant experiences. (Thus, an intellectual belief in the existence of a God now loving and now angry can be made to yield delicious thrills alternately of confidence and

terror.) Balzac was 'in the movement'—but, as usual, moving much faster and more violently than the current which bore him along. By nature a high-spirited cynic and sceptic (*plus il vit, plus il douta*), he could transform himself on occasion, by sheer force of make-believe, into a fashionable church-goer, a more than fashionable Swedenborgian. The superstitiousness natural to all sceptics (for to a Pyrrhonist absolutely everything is possible) came to his assistance here. Besides, like most great men, he was a bit of a charlatan; he loved to impress his readers, he loved to tell them the answer to the Riddle of the Universe —straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. (For a philosophic tipster, Swedenborg and Boehme are obviously winners.) Finally, Balzac possessed the intelligent literary man's interest in science—that quite irresponsible interest of the man who has never had any scientific training, never done any practical scientific work and for whom, in consequence, science is just a magic art, like any other, only more respectable, guaranteed as it is by sorcerers who have received knighthoods and rosettes of the Legion of Honour. Nor does the intelligent literary man much distinguish one scientist from another; the only preferences he has are for those scientists he can understand and those who deal with the kind of subject that lends itself to literary treatment. Which generally means, in practice, that he prefers bad scientists to good ones. In Balzac's day the literary man's favourite scientist was not Laplace or Faraday, but

Mesmer—just as to-day it is to the wilder Freudians rather than to Einstein or Pavlov that he turns. Science—the science of the intelligent literary man—seems to confirm the misty and schismatical doctrines of mysticism. Which, for Balzac, was a further justification, if any were needed, for feeling, or trying to feel, or at any rate saying that one felt those mystical emotions which all the best people, from the *ultra* duchess with her *six cent mille livres de rente* down to the humblest saint in the calendar, were feeling or had felt.

I have lingered thus long over Balzac, because I feel his case to be so instructive, so profoundly relevant. He set himself the task of reviving in the person of the novelist that man of universal learning, that creator-of-all-trades, who was the glory of the Renaissance. His ambition was to know everything, both in the outer world and in that within; to know everything and to be every one—yes, to be both mystic and mundane, idealist as well as cynic, contemplator no less than man of action. That he should have realized even a part of this immense and impossible ambition is a sign of his extraordinary power. His problems are the problems which confront the contemporary novelist who aspires, not indeed to universality (for only a lunatic or a conscious superman could cherish such ambitions to-day) but, more modestly, to intelligence, to awareness of contemporaneity, to self-consciousness, to truthfulness, to artistic integrity. And the temptations by

which Balzac was beset, the dangers which threatened and the artistic disasters which overtook him are precisely the temptations, dangers and disasters, in the midst of which the contemporary novelist must, if he is in the least ambitious, pick his way.

In *Séraphita* we see a terrifying example of the disaster which overtakes writers who succumb to the temptation of protesting too much about matters of which they know too little. (I use the word 'know' to signify, in this case, the immediate, first-hand knowledge that is born of feeling. Balzac had a considerable abstract knowledge of mysticism; it was his crime that he also pretended to possess an intuitive, emotional knowledge from within, and his misfortune that he lacked, or lost, those literary arts, by means of which he might have made the pretence convincing. 'Lost'—for, as I have said, Balzac could write, not beautifully perhaps, but well and vigorously enough about his beloved World, just as Milton could be unaffectedly sublime about the Flesh (his account of the first wedding is bright with an almost unearthly glow of sensuality) and that indomitable Devil, whose self-esteem was founded, like Milton's own, on 'just and right.' The moment Balzac had to protest too much, as he had to do about matters which did not lie near his heart, he lost this power to write well and sank or soared into fustian.

*Séraphita* is characterized by a peculiar emotional vulgarity. In his attempt to express the mystical emotions

which he does not naturally have, Balzac is forced to make incessant overstatements. Not only do the characters themselves protest, both in speech and in action, much too much; the symbols with which Balzac surrounds them also protest too much. It would be easy by means of extended quotation to illustrate what I have been saying about *Séraphita.* But world and time are lacking, and I must be content to cite this one sentence, into which Balzac has considerately crammed examples of almost all the faults which characterize his mystical writing. 'And with a lifted finger, this singular being showed her the blue aureole which the clouds, by leaving a clear space above their heads, had drawn in the sky and in which the stars could be seen in daylight, in virtue of hitherto unexplained atmospheric laws.' In these few lines Balzac has succumbed to three separate temptations. First, in his anxiety to impress us with the mystical merits of his Séraphita, he has called her 'a singular being.' (He gives her many other such honorific titles in the course of his narrative: she is 'unique,' 'inexplicable,' and the like.) The adjective protests too much about a matter which it was the business of the story itself and not the commenting author to make clear.

Consider, in the second place, that aureole of blue sky, which follows Séraphita about in all her rambles like a celestial dog, however cloudy the weather. This symbol is so obviously poetical, so loudly significant of Higher

Things, that it fails to impress—it merely shocks, as the diamond rings symbolical of Levantine opulence merely shock without impressing. The stars are just a set of diamond studs to match the rings. But in those hitherto unexplained atmospheric laws, in virtue of which they are visible by daylight, we have another, quite new vulgarity—an intellectual vulgarity this time. It is Balzac the charlatan, Balzac the philosophic tipster giving us a piece of inside information, straight from the scientific horse's mouth. Now one can talk very knowingly in a novel, poem or other work of literary art even about such things as hitherto unexplained atmospheric laws, without necessarily being vulgar; but only on condition that the talking is done tactfully and with perfect relevance. One must be, as Jean Coteau said of that most universally knowing of modern novelists, M. Paul Morand, '*un nouveau riche qui sait recevoir*.' M. Morand has a wonderfully airy, easy way of implying that he has looked into everything—absolutely everything, from God and the Quantum Theory to the slums of Baku (the world's most classy slums—didn't you know it?), from the Vanderbilt family and all the Ritz Hotels to the unpublished poetry of Father Hopkins. Just the quick passing implication of knowledge, just the right word in each particular case, the absolutely correct, esoteric formula—that is all. M. Morand is the almost perfect literary knower; he hardly ever, at any rate in his earlier books, makes a mistake. Balzac was too serious in

his charlatanism, too vastly ambitious, too energetic to be a very tactful intellectual hostess; for all his wealth he did not know how to receive. Thus, in the present case, he has fallen into vulgarity, because he could not resist the temptation of being knowing at a most inopportune moment. That horse's-mouth information about atmospheric laws has been dragged irrelevantly and absurdly into the middle of a poetic symbol—a much too poetic symbol, as we have seen; which only makes the incongruity more apparent. Blue aureoles are a part of an angel's uniform, as much *de rigueur* among Cherubs as top-hats at a Royal Garden Party. Unexplained atmospheric laws have nothing to do with angels. By bringing them thus incongruously together, Balzac calls attention to the vulgarity of a knowingness which insists on displaying itself at all costs and on all occasions.

The case of Dickens is a strange one. The really monstrous emotional vulgarity, of which he is guilty now and then in all his books and almost continuously in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is not the emotional vulgarity of one who simulates feelings which he does not have. It is evident, on the contrary, that Dickens felt most poignantly for and with his Little Nell; that he wept over her sufferings, piously revered her goodness and exulted in her joys. He had an overflowing heart; but the trouble was that it overflowed with such curious and even rather repellant secretions. The creator of the later Pickwick and the

Cheeryble Brothers, of Tim Linkinwater the bachelor and Mr. Garland and so many other gruesome old Peter Pans was obviously a little abnormal in his emotional reactions. There was something rather wrong with a man who could take this lachrymose and tremulous pleasure in adult infantility. He would doubtless have justified his rather frightful emotional taste by a reference to the New Testament. But the child-like qualities of character commended by Jesus are certainly not the same as those which distinguish the old infants in Dickens's novels. There is all the difference in the world between infants and children. Infants are stupid and unaware and sub-human. Children are remarkable for their intelligence and ardour, for their curiosity, their intolerance of shams, the clarity and ruthlessness of their vision. From all accounts Jesus must have been child-like, not at all infantile. A child-like man is not a man whose development has been arrested ; on the contrary, he is a man who has given himself a chance of continuing to develop long after most adults have muffled themselves in the cocoon of middle-aged habit and convention. An infantile man is one who has not developed at all, or who has regressed towards the womb, into a comfortable unawareness. So far from being attractive and commendable, an infantile man is really a most repulsive, because a truly monstrous and misshapen, being. A writer who can tearfully adore these stout or cadaverous old babies, snugly ensconced in their mental and economic

womb-substitutes and sucking, between false teeth, their thumbs, must have something seriously amiss with his emotional constitution.

One of Dickens's most striking peculiarities is that, whenever in his writing he becomes emotional, he ceases instantly to use his intelligence. The overflowing of his heart drowns his head and even dims his eyes; for, whenever he is in the melting mood, Dickens ceases to be able and probably ceases even to wish to see reality. His one and only desire on these occasions is just to overflow, nothing else. Which he does, with a vengeance and in an atrocious blank verse that is meant to be poetical prose and succeeds only in being the worst kind of fustian. 'When Death strikes down the innocent and young, from every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity and love, to walk the world and bless it. Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes. In the Destroyer's steps there spring up bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to Heaven.' And so on, a stanchless flux.

Mentally drowned and blinded by the sticky overflowings of his heart, Dickens was incapable, when moved, of re-creating, in terms of art, the reality which had moved him, was even, it would seem, unable to perceive that reality. Little Nelly's sufferings and death distressed him

as, in real life, they would distress any normally constituted man; for the suffering and death of children raise the problem of evil in its most unanswerable form. It was Dickens's business as a writer to re-create in terms of his art this distressing reality. He failed. The history of Little Nell is distressing indeed, but not as Dickens presumably meant it to be distressing; it is distressing in its ineptitude and vulgar sentimentality.

A child, Ilusha, suffers and dies in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Why is this history so agonizingly moving, when the tale of Little Nell leaves us not merely cold, but derisive? Comparing the two stories, we are instantly struck by the incomparably greater richness in factual detail of Dostoevsky's creation. Feeling did not prevent him from seeing and recording, or rather re-creating. All that happened round Ilusha's deathbed he saw, unerringly. The emotion-blinded Dickens noticed practically nothing of what went on in Little Nelly's neighbourhood during the child's last days. We are almost forced, indeed, to believe that he didn't want to see anything. He wanted to be unaware himself and he wanted his readers to be unaware of everything except Little Nell's sufferings on the one hand and her goodness and innocence on the other. But goodness and innocence and the undeservedness of suffering and even, to some extent, suffering itself are only significant in relation to the actual realities of human life. Isolated, they cease to mean

anything, perhaps to exist. Even the classical writers surrounded their abstract and algebraical personages with at least the abstract and algebraical implication of the human realities, in relation to which virtues and vices are significant. Thanks to Dickens's pathologically deliberate unawareness, Nell's virtues are marooned, as it were, in the midst of a boundless waste of unreality; isolated, they fade and die. Even her sufferings and death lack significance because of this isolation. Dickens's unawareness was the death of death itself. Unawareness, according to the ethics of Buddhism, is one of the deadly sins. The stupid are wicked. (Incidentally, the cleverest men can, sometimes and in certain circumstances, reveal themselves as profoundly—criminally—stupid. You can be an acute logician and at the same time an emotional cretin.) Damned in the realm of conduct, the unaware are also damned aesthetically. Their art is bad; instead of creating, they murder.

Art, as I have said, is also philosophy, is also science. Other things being equal, the work of art, which in its own way 'says' more about the universe will be better than the work of art which says less. (The 'other things' which have to be equal are the forms of beauty, in terms of which the artist must express his philosophic and scientific truths.) Why is *The Rosary* a less admirable novel than *The Brothers Karamazov*? Because the amount of experience of all kinds understood, 'felt into,' as the Germans

would say, and artistically re-created by Mrs. Barclay is small in comparison with that which Dostoevsky feelingly comprehended and knew so consummately well how to re-create in terms of the novelist's art. Dostoevsky covers all Mrs. Barclay's ground and a vast area beside. The pathetic parts of *The Old Curiosity Shop* are as poor in understood and artistically re-created experience as *The Rosary*—indeed, I think they are even poorer. At the same time they are vulgar (which *The Rosary*, that genuine masterpiece of the servants' hall, is not). They are vulgar, because their poverty is a pretentious poverty, because their disease (for the quality of Dickens's sentimentality is truly pathological) professes to be the most radiant health ; because they protest their unintelligence, their lack of understanding with a vehemence of florid utterance that is not only shocking, but ludicrous.

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